

Redefining school leadership responsibilities

I agree with most of the recommendations in this chapter of the report. However, my support is dependant on particular interpretations of the concepts used and on certain conditions which need to be in place if the recommendations are going to work in the intended way.

I'll try to clarify what I mean by discussing one example. The first, and probably the most important recommendation in this part of the report, is to enhance the decision making authority of school leadership leading to greater school autonomy.

First, it is important to recognise that school autonomy usually is, and should be, linked to the accountability system used by the authority that has delegated the school its autonomy. It is important that this accountability system is fair in the sense that there is a balance between what the school is given the authority to control and how the school results are evaluated. The main problem with many of the accountability systems we see emerging in many countries is that the school outcomes are defined much more narrowly than the aims officially set for schools by the local and central government. It is also often much more narrow than the goals described in the national curriculum.

Secondly, school leaders are often held accountable for learning outcomes even though they are drowned by administrative tasks. This makes it very difficult for them to prioritise time to leadership of learning. This is very often the case in Norway because municipalities and sometimes regional governments have reduced their number of staff with educational training above the school level. It is therefore necessary to look critically at the charts in the report that seems to indicate that schools and school leaders in successful schools in general have been given greater autonomy. In my country, this formal delegation of autonomy has happened during a period when the school budgets in many municipalities have been reduced. The autonomy, instead of empowering the school leaders, can be seen as a calculated strategy to give lower administrative levels the responsibility for how budget cuts will have to be made.

Third, the school autonomy must be balanced against the need for professional autonomy of the individual teacher and of the teaching profession. Even if all the extra authority given to schools is delegated from higher levels, some of this authority should be delegated to individual teachers or a collective of teachers. For me it is therefore particularly important to stress that greater school autonomy must be linked with high degrees of distributed leadership. The distribution of leadership therefore must be built into the delegation decisions.

Another important issue is to signal and define the most important responsibilities of school leaders. I totally agree that the most important leadership tasks are those that have the greatest impact on the learning outcomes of pupils. Since we know that it is the quality of teaching that is *the* most important factor for student learning, I think it is obvious that the most important leadership tasks are those that can influence the teachers' teaching quality in a positive way. And what are those?

I think the most important task is to motivate the teachers' own learning and to give them opportunities to learn, both individually and collectively. The quality of teaching will not improve unless the teachers' competence is constantly improving. The learning must take place both by systemising the learning achieved through the daily work and by building systems for continual and prolonged competence development throughout the teacher carrier.

There are indications in some new Norwegian research that general teachers are less involved in systemised learning and that they rely less on research based knowledge than other professionals like nurses, accountants and computer engineers. Instead teachers seem to rely on their own more or less systematised experiences. There are probably many reasons for

this and the report from this so called ProLearn project speculates that one reason is that the subject area covered by a general teacher is too wide to link on strongly to a particular academic discipline. Another might be that pedagogical research traditionally has been too normative and theoretical in a way where teachers don't recognise their own challenges in the research questions.

Whatever reason, it is a great challenge to inspire teachers to engage in more systemised learning in their work and that they get more involved in research and development work. The tricky question is: how can the school leadership help to achieve this goal. There are many possibilities of course, however, I think maybe the most important is to be good role models: that school leaders are constantly engaged in their own learning and that they challenge their teachers to find new solutions in areas where accountability systems have found weaknesses in the school's performance.

It is important that each teacher has a negotiated individual learning plan. This plan must be linked both to the individual teacher's carrier plan, to the schools development plan and must also take into consideration national competence priorities.

Accountability systems must not be standardised in every detail at national level and involve very high stakes. If so, they tend not to inspire experimentation and the willingness to take risk when looking for new solutions.

A word on teacher recruitment: It is true as the chart says that Norwegian school leaders have been given greater autonomy over teacher recruitment. In many cases this has turned out to work well. However, there seems to be some side-effects. Since principals have been given the right to decide how the budget is allocated, and since they have been given the task to administer budget cuts, some school leaders have tended to hire young inexperienced teachers, or even just teacher assistants, instead of experienced teachers with high formal qualifications because this is cheaper. One important result is that the experienced teachers tend to stay at the same school almost for their whole carrier. I think this is very unfortunate. I think one important way teachers will learn more, is to move between schools so that they meet new colleagues and new challenges.

Another indication that this kind of charted information based on very simple questions and subjective and culturally tainted answers, only show a very limited part of the truth, is the case of Finland. You'll notice how Finland tends to score low on most of the indicators that show different aspects of autonomy. I doubt

very much that teachers and school leaders in Finland feel they have a low degree of professional autonomy. We therefore need more in depth research to go beyond the PISA-data.

In many of the countries such research is emerging, also in my own. If this continues, it has the potential of being a very important and positive effect of PISA. The time is overdue that we stop letting the PISA data alone play such an overwhelmingly dominant role in evaluation of the quality of education systems in the different countries.